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ABSTRACT

Sentence combining can act as a corrective for the large number of language arts lessons and activities that emphasize errors. Based on familiar sentence patterns, sentence combining provides models of effective language use and encourages students to examine and try more expressive and interesting styles of speaking and writing. Sentence combining activities can help teach many skills and concepts in the language arts curriculum. In addition to providing extensive practice in creating sentence structures, sentence combining can help students develop effective paragraphs. For this, kernel sentences are combined into more complex sentences and written in a sequence. Exercises involving several main ideas lead to practice in identifying and writing multiple paragraphs. Creative writing can be introduced through the expansion of sentences. In these exercises, the students are given a basic sentence and asked to make it tell more or sound more interesting by the addition of words and ideas. Sentence combining not only provides a content for writing, it also encourages the use of common vocabulary for discussion of writing structure. More than developing skills in recognizing and correcting errors, sentence combining emphasizes student production of appropriate and interesting sentences. (HOD)

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THE IMPLICATIONS OF SENTENCE COMBINING FOR THE LANGUAGE ARTS CURRICULUM

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The Implications of Sentence Combining for the Language Arts Curriculum

Sentence combining is the process of combining two or more kernel sentences into fewer sentences conveying the same basic ideas. At the simplest level, a sentence combining activity might ask that the following sentences be combined: The dog is brown. The dog is big. The dog belongs to the neighbors. The combined sentence could be: The big brown dog belongs to the neighbors. From this simple level, sentence combining activities go on to create much more involved sentence structures as well as to express complex ideas in groups of sentences formulated into carefully designed paragraphs and essays.

Sentence combining is receiving increased attention by researchers and teachers who are searching for more effective ways to help students master their language. The positive results of research efforts, along with what is known about how children learn to use their language, have interesting implications for sentence combining as it relates to the language arts curriculum. These implications are based on the interrelationship of informal language learning, language arts instruction, and current knowledge of sentence combining.

Language and the Language Arts

Language Learning

By the time most children begin their formal schooling, they have learned to use oral language fluently in an expressive and acceptable manner. Not only can they pronounce and use an extensive variety of words, but they can also use these words to create sentences that require a

well-developed sense of the structure of the language. As they hear language in their daily lives, children begin to experiment, to try words and phrases and to make the language their own. In the early stages, children express ideas separately using a single expression to convey a single idea. As they mature, they begin to combine several ideas into one expression or sentence. Thus, much of children's natural learning of language is an intuitive application of the concept of sentence combining.

Language Arts Instruction

In the area of language instruction, the role of the school is to help students increase their understanding and use of the spoken language and to learn to use the written language. This includes developing an expanded vocabulary, learning the correct usage of words, and learning the conventions of written English. As students grow older, they are expected to use language in a more mature form, as exemplified by speaking or writing in an expressive, interesting manner, and by using words with the precise meaning for a specific purpose.

Most language arts programs are built around instruction in correct word usage, spelling, and conventions of writing--especially punctuation, capitalization, and correct forms of personal and business letters. At the upper elementary levels, there is heavier emphasis on grammar, along with instruction in the history of the English language. At all levels of elementary school, most programs include opportunities for students to use English in creative and practical applications such as dramatizations, reporting, and writing stories and articles.

For reasons that are probably more accidental than intentional, a major portion of the lessons and activities used in language arts instruction place

heavy emphasis on errors. The focus is typically on recognizing and correcting errors, rather than on producing interesting and appropriate ways of expressing ideas. There are serious weaknesses in this error-centered approach. Perhaps the most important is that it doesn't take advantage of what children already know about their language. To a great extent, children can and do use their language correctly. The error-centered approach leads to a disproportionate emphasis on the small percentage of recurring undesirable usages (e.g., it don't, me and Lee, I don't got one). Far too little emphasis is placed on the enormous variety of acceptable and appropriate usages expressed regularly by most students.

Another weakness is the negative influence the emphasis on errors has on student attitudes toward learning English. Students know that the probability of getting red marks indicating unacceptable sentence structure or word usage is very high--and that the probability of getting praise for correct or interesting structures is painfully low.

A third weakness of the error-centered approach is simply that it hasn't been successful. Teachers, parents and many other concerned citizens continue to moan about low achievement in English and a general inability of youngsters to use the language effectively. The time has come to discontinue the use of an instructional approach that has not been successful in achieving the goal of effective use of the English language.

Sentence Combining and the Language Arts

An approach that emphasizes what children already know--that builds on their successful language experiences--is needed to counteract the weaknesses of error-centered instruction. Sentence combining is an approach that builds

on children's knowledge of their language. It begins with familiar basic sentence patterns, provides models of effective uses of language, and encourages students to examine and try more expressive and interesting styles of speaking and writing. Sentence combining deserves serious consideration as an essential element in the language arts curriculum.

Research Background

A number of studies have examined the effects of sentence combining instruction on the growth of syntactic fluency in students' writing. Several researchers have found positive results in the use of sentence combining exercises to increase or enhance syntactic maturity of elementary students (Hunt and O'Donnell, 1970; Mellon, 1969; Miller and Ney, 1968; and O'Hare, 1971). In addition to the effects on writing achievement, there is a strong suggestion that sentence combining exercises may have a positive effect on reading skills (Hunt and O'Donnell, 1970).

As an outgrowth of an extensive review of sentence combining as a curricular activity, Stotsky (1975) proposes: "The success of writing programs featuring sentence-combining exercises in increasing the syntactic maturity and overall quality of children's writing may have only opened the door to an uncharted and unexplored area--the concept of writing as a profound mental activity, not simply as a spontaneous transcription of oral speech" (pp. 66-67). This proposal deserves the attention of educators who are striving to increase the impact of formal instruction on students' ability to think as well as to write.

A more recent study (Melvin, 1980) examined the effects of sentence combining instruction on the language arts skills of capitalization, punctuation, and grammar as well as on syntactic maturity. The results indicated that students

who participated in sentence combining instruction without instruction in mechanics or grammar, attained the same level of achievement in mechanics and grammar as did their peers who had received regular instruction in these areas. This strongly suggests that instruction in sentence combining may be an effective alternative to traditional instruction in grammar and the mechanics of written English. The possibility of using the single approach of sentence combining for the multiple purposes of teaching the mechanics of written English and grammar as well as for improving syntactic maturity has exciting implications for unifying the language arts curriculum.

Sentence Combining Instruction

Sentence combining activities can be designed as the basis of instruction for many of the skills and concepts of the language arts curriculum. To provide the most effective learning environment, individual lessons are designed to achieve one main objective; however, every lesson has the possibility of reinforcing numerous skills and concepts that are the main topic of other lessons.

Skills and concepts--an example. One detailed example can serve to illustrate the flexibility of sentence combining for achieving instructional objectives. In this example, the first steps of instruction focus on the simple task of coordinating words and phrases within a sentence. At the beginning level, students can be asked to combine two kernel sentences:

Lee plays dominoes. Jerry plays dominoes.

The most likely combination would be, "Lee and Jerry play dominoes." This exercise doesn't necessarily teach students anything new about sentence structure, but it does serve as an effective introductory exercise to help them become more aware of the extent of their ability to use their language. One

of the secondary outcomes of a set of lessons using this pattern is that students notice that the verb form changes as the subject changes from singular to plural. As students practice writing similar exercises, they also get reinforcement in the mechanics of using capital letters for proper nouns and using a period at the end of a declarative sentence.

In a follow-up lesson, it would be logical to teach the use of commas to separate words in a series. An exercise for this purpose would be:

Ann went to the movie.

Bill went to the movie.

Sue went to the movie.

As students write their combinations, they get practice in the use of commas:

Ann, Bill, and Sue went to the movie.

Notice that the skills of capitalizing proper names and using a period at the end of a declarative sentence are again reinforced, even though they are not the main topics of the lesson.

Once students understand the use of commas in a series, they can apply the skill to phrases:

Pat took a shower.

Pat found a book.

Pat crawled up in a chair.

Pat started to read.

In this example, they practice coordinating phrases and, at the same time, get extended practice in using commas. An exercise such as this also permits combinations in different sequences which can lead to discussion about the effect of sequence on the meaning of the sentence.

Although the preceding example describes lessons only at the introductory level of sentence combining, it illustrates the flexibility and extent of use

of sentence combining. In more complex exercises, there are many more options for acceptable combinations as well as extensive opportunities to discuss various combinations and identify those which sound best (most elementary students--as well as adults--are not able to explain why some sentences sound better than others, but they can identify those that do). As students become aware of the almost unlimited ways to express ideas, they often begin to view sentence combining as a challenging game or puzzle. It is not unlikely that they will make up exercises and try them out on their own. One of the favorite challenges is to see how many combinations can be written for a set of kernel sentences. Those who would enjoy this challenge might start with this exercise:

Sally left early.

It surprised me.

(The author would be delighted to hear from any enthusiasts who combine these sentences in a hundred different ways!)

In addition to the wide range of practice in sentence structures, sentence combining can also be the basis for writing paragraphs. For this purpose, kernel sentences are combined into more complex sentences and written in a sequence that creates an effective paragraph. Exercises involving several main ideas lead to practice in identifying and writing multiple paragraphs.

Creative writing. Sentence combining instruction is generally based on sets of kernel sentences presented to the students. However, it should never be allowed to replace creative writing activities in the curriculum. Rather, sentence combining activities can be used to enhance creative writing.

One way to introduce creative writing in the context of sentence combining is through expanding sentences. In these exercises, the students are given a basic sentence and asked to make it tell more or sound more interesting by

adding words and ideas. A sample of such a sentence is:

The car stopped.

Such a sentence can be expanded in many ways such as adding adjectives to the subject, replacing the verb with a more descriptive word, or adding adverbial phrases. Expanded sentences resulting from such exercises often serve well as starters for complete stories. After students have played around with sentences and created something unique from a bland beginning, they are often ready to go ahead and turn their ideas into complete stories.

A modification of the above activity is to have students create their own basic sentences, then expand them. This activity is particularly effective for working in small groups or pairs. The opportunity to work together encourages greater effort to create something very special from very simple sentences.

Another approach to creative writing is to begin with certain types of sentence structures rather than with the content of given sentences. For instance, students may be asked to create another sentence following this model:

The cabin in the mountains is small.

Sentences can be presented and discussed in terms of whether or not they follow the pattern. As students strive to put together similar sentences, they will share ideas that can serve as story starters. They can then be asked to write the stories that grow out of their sentences.

Finally, there should be opportunities for creative writing that are not related to sentence combining--or any other skill or instructional approach. On a regular basis, students should have opportunities to write stories, reports or other essays that result from their own thinking, their ideas, and their involvement with language. (As an aside, it is highly

likely that the regular writing practice related to sentence combining exercises will help students think of ideas and get started when they're writing on their own!)

Reflections on Sentence Combining and Language Arts

The nature of sentence combining makes it a flexible tool for introducing concepts and practicing many of the skills that make up the language arts curriculum. Sentence combining has many characteristics that are important in improving existing language arts programs.

One of the strengths of sentence combining is that the content of the writing is provided for the students. This content is usually in the form of single concept (kernel) sentences; the task of the learner is to combine a number of ideas into interesting, expressive sentences and paragraphs. Thus, students get practice in expressing ideas without the additional stress of having to come up with the ideas in the first place.

Another very important aspect of sentence combining is sharing and discussing various ways to express the same basic ideas. Using one set of kernel sentences as the basis of a discussion makes it possible for students to share their combinations and to point out the strengths and weaknesses of different possibilities. This type of comparison can not be done with typical creative writing activities because of the diversity of content, ideas, and sentence structures.

Sentence combining not only provides the content; it also encourages the use of a common vocabulary for discussing the structure of writing. As students learn about sentence combining, they begin to use words and phrases such as <u>combining</u>, <u>expanded sentences</u>, and <u>most expressive sentence</u> in

evaluating different ways to express an idea. As they progress, they can use terms such as coordinate, descriptive, adverbial phrase, etc. Learning and using this vocabulary provides the students with a meaningful and useful tool for discussing and evaluating characteristics of various styles of writing.

Group instruction that involves discussing, judging and evaluating children's creative writing can be very threatening to those students who prefer not to share their ideas openly with others. In sentence combining lessons, discussions use the content provided in the lesson to focus on the sentence combinations and structures. These may be written by several individuals, or by students working in pairs or small groups. In this way, children need not be threatened by the possibility that the personal ideas they include in their creative writing will become the focus of discussions of style and structure.

Sentence combining is less threatening in another way because it is not an error-centered approach. In contrast to a typical approach of recognizing and correcting errors, sentence combining emphasizes student production of appropriate and interesting sentences. Students learn to identify the strong characteristics of their writing and to use these strengths as they progress toward greater syntactic maturity.

In quite a different vein, another strength of sentence combining may be simply that it is a different approach to language arts instruction. Currently, knowledge and understanding of learning styles is quite limited. However, as knowledge in this area grows and more emphasis is put on providing instructional activities that are most appropriate for each individual's learning style, it will be increasingly important to have alternative approaches for achieving instructional objectives.

Finally, the greatest strength of sentence combining is that it provides a cohesiveness that has all too often been lacking in elementary language arts programs. Sentence combining can be used for instruction in the mechanics of written language (capitalization, punctuation), grammar, and effective written expression. Instructional time may be utilized more effectively by using sentence combining activities as a single focus for instruction in all areas of written language. If less time can be devoted to direct instruction in the skills of writing, it will be possible to provide more time and opportunities for student-motivated writing, both creative and practical.

Sentence combining is not necessarily the answer to the problems facing teachers in language arts instruction today. However, it is an exciting and effective alternative to other approaches. And, sentence combining can certainly serve as the unifying element of the language arts curriculum--an element which has been missing for far too long.

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